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# No disruption of power while president is recovering

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WASHINGTON — Washington behaves very well at times like this.

Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi Arabian ambassador to Washington who was a pilot at an Air Force base in Georgia in 1974, remembers what happened the night before Richard Nixon resigned.

He wondered what the military would do and he spent most of the night listening for some kind of signals at the base. But nothing happened, although it was the first time a president had resigned.

There are few countries in the world, given the trauma of a president who had lied to the country and attempted the subversion of justice, where a transition of power could be made peacefully.

The night before the resignation, large groups of people walked in front of the White House and for the most part they did not talk: there was neither great joy nor great sadness. Nor was there fear that the system would fail.

What is happening in Washington now is nothing like that day 11 years ago. The president is ill and, because he is 74, many Americans are worried about his future health and how he will be able to perform his job.

But for now it is probably best to remember that this great bureaucracy, which can slow the progress of government is also the engine that keeps things working.

John Kennedy, sitting in the Oval Office, once ordered the removal of a CIA sign in McLean, Va. He tried three times, but failed. He then observed in frustration — and some admiration — that a madman could be sitting in the president's chair and the bureaucracy would always be there to check any excesses.

It really matters little that Vice President George Bush has not been in to see the president, for instance, though some will make much of it. Bush's relationship with the president and Nancy Reagan is good and secure; it needs no test.

Bush is a valuable resource, both politically and administratively for the president. He knows what is going on in both foreign and domestic affairs. He is well briefed by everyone in the administration, and his weekly meetings alone

with the president, usually over lunch, where they are frank with each other, are of great value to him.

So although the transfer of power while the president was in the operating room at Bethesda Naval Hospital was

carefully done so as not to create what the administration hoped was a precedent, it was done without the pulling and tugging that was visible at the time of Dwight Eisenhower's illnesses. Perhaps the time simply demanded it, but it is inescapable that Bush enjoys a better relationship with Reagan than Nixon did with Eisenhower.

Further, not much should be made of what the president is doing and is not doing in the next few days. He is ill. When his chief of staff, Donald Regan, brought him papers Monday at the hospital, Reagan had dozed off after reading a Calvin Coolidge biography, certain to make anyone sleep. Regan left and came back in the afternoon.

How the president functions when he comes back to the White House and how the medical treatment goes is more important.

There are bound to be some touchy times. Chief of Staff Regan does not always have the deft touch and it might be useful for him to read the clips of Sherman Adams, the crusty chief of staff under Eisenhower, who was criticized for taking over what some thought were the powers of the presidency.

But Reagan's presidency is ideally suited to delegation of authority. For instance, the tax program was due to get a run-through at the White House this week with members of the Senate Finance Committee; Republicans and Democrats meeting separately. The meetings were to be run by Treasury Secretary James Baker; Regan and the president were to drop in to see how things were going. The meetings will be held, but there will be no presidential appearance.

Foreign affairs is a collegial system presided over by Secretary of State George Shultz, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and the national security adviser, Robert McFarlane. Though Weinberger and Shultz have policy differences, they have been together too long for either one of them to pull off the kind of show that Alexander Haig did for the

press when the president was shot in 1981 and Haig essentially said he was taking over.

Reagan has never been a hands-on president like Jimmy Carter. He makes only those decisions he has had to make. In this case it is perhaps a benefit, because he can still do that.

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